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CONSUMING UTOPIAN THOUGHT IN AN ANTI-UTOPIAN AGE: THE RECEPTION OF ANDREJ PLATONOV'S *ČEVENGUR* IN TODAY'S RUSSIA

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Abstract

The article discusses the reception of Andrei Platonov's novel *Chevengur* in today's Russia. It focuses on Lev Dodin's 1999 production of Platonov's novel and juxtaposes it with the interpretations offered by Joseph Brodsky and Tatiana Tolstaia. The article demonstrates that the suggestion to include this novel into the list of compulsory reading recommended to all school leavers in Russia proposed by a group of Russian scholars in January 2012 is highly problematic. It argues that, in order to understand Platonov's utopian thought and symbolic language, the post-Soviet reader needs to have a solid knowledge of Russian intellectual trends of the 1920s.

Keywords: *A.P. Platonov*; '*Chevengur*'; *Joseph Brodsky*; *Tatiana Tolstaia*; *Lev Dodin*; *Reception*; *Education*

On 23 January 2012 the Russian liberal newspaper *The Independent* (*Nezavisimaja gazeta*) published an article by Vladimir Putin on Russian ethnicity and nationhood. It conveyed Putin's desire to create a list of books that should be recommended to all school children living in Russia today – with a view to integrate all ethnic groups in a more efficient way.¹ The gist of Putin's article is promotion of unity and shared cultural values. It invokes Benedict Anderson's 1983 seminal study *Imagined Communities* in which the

notion of nationhood is explained in cultural not political terms. Anderson sees the emergence of imagined community as a cultural construct based on a mental image of affinity across all members of a community as part of the development of print capitalism. According to Anderson, "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship".² In an Andersonian way, a group of scholars from the Moscow University for Humanities compiled a list of a hundred items that, in their view, should satisfy Putin's plan to bring all disparate groups of Russian society together. Their list of books includes Andrej Platonov's novel *Čevengur* (written in 1928, first published in full in 1988). Vladimir Lukov, a participant in the project on the construction of the new Russian cultural canon, explains that the methodology applied to this project was based on the binary opposition that distinguishes between the Russian and Western literary canons and takes account of the length of works as well as their relevance to Russian history and national self-consciousness. Lukov claims that the list of books compiled by him and his colleagues also reflects the interests of post-Soviet readers.³

The inclusion of Platonov's *Čevengur* in the list of canonical texts recommended to post-Soviet schoolchildren evidences that Platonov's novel has become more accessible to Russian readers since its first publication in 1988 in Moscow. According to Nina Malygina, a leading specialist on Platonov in Russia, post-Soviet readers continue to see Platonov as a difficult, enigmatic and mysterious author whose works require their own hermeneutic.⁴ The present article will focus on the interpretations of Platonov's dystopian novel *Čevengur* offered by several prominent cultural figures, including Joseph Brodsky, Tat'jana Tolstaja and Lev Dodin. It will assess the peculiarities of their assessment of Platonov's world-view and language in the light of the desire of Russian intellectuals to highlight some positive aspects of Platonov's utopian thought that might enable a contemporary reader to overcome his melancholic Self.

Commenting on metatextual qualities of Platonov's works that incorporate the elements of symbolist, avant-garde and proletarian aesthetics, Malygina highlights that there is no binary opposition in Platonov's portrayal of his fictional characters. Platonov's protagonists, asserts Malygina, are often mirrored by other characters, creating thereby a sense of interconnectedness between them all. Moreover, Malygina points out that the central place in Platonov's artistic system is allocated to an ideal creative person who radiates harmony and is ascribed with qualities of a father figure concerned with the well-being of his nation. Malygina argues that this ideal character's commitment to the salvation of the world and humankind makes him comparable to Jesus Christ.⁵ Irene Masing-Delic offers a more accurate assessment of the role of the salvation myth in Platonov's works; she suggests that Platonov's image of a master-mechanic (as portrayed in his 1928 story 'Secret Man' ['Sokrovennyj čelovek']) preoccupied with the dream of the elimination of

death and the resurrection of the dead in a workshop was inspired by many ideological and philosophical trends of the 1910s-1920s. According to Mas-ing-Delic, representatives of Russia's artistic and creative intelligentsia of the 1920s saw the notion of death as incompatible with a vision of the new world in which "material justice has allegedly triumphed".⁶ Needless to say, the late Soviet period and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 had contributed to the withering away of the buoyant idealism of 1920s Russia, replacing it with a widespread melancholic desire for meaning and the enchantment that cannot be met in an age of utilitarian reasoning. In his study on the fate of utopian thought and its reception in an age characterised by anti-utopian trends, Russell Jacoby describes postmodern readers as narrow utilitarian thinkers concerned with fixing various emergencies rather than with creativity and re-invention. Jacoby says that today most observers perceive utopians either as dreamers or murderous totalitarians.⁷ As will be argued below, the selection of Platonov's *Čevengur* for the inclusion into the list of books that will be used for nation-building purposes might be seen as problematic, especially because Platonov's worldview was largely shaped by the intellectual trends of the 1910s-1920s that were inadequately studied in Russia before the 1990s.

Firstly, it would be useful to evaluate Brodsky's 1984 essay 'Catastrophes in the Air' in which Platonov's works 'The Foundation Pit' ('Kot-lovan') and *Čevengur* are discussed as indescribable books permeated with the power of devastation that present the subject matter disjointedly. In Brodsky's view, their ability to shock the reader relates not only to social criticism but is also inseparable from philosophical concerns. Brodsky expresses doubt that these two books could ever be published in the Soviet Union because they target both the social evil and "the sensibility of language that has brought that evil about".⁸ Brodsky describes Platonov as a millenarian writer who undermines the revolutionary eschatology embedded in the language and exposes the anarchic sensibility advocated by many radically minded representatives of the Russian intelligentsia.⁹

According to Brodsky's assessment of the roots of Russian millenarianism that shaped Platonov's outlook and his style of expression, the socio-political atmosphere in Russia prior to the 1920s was highly politicised and radicalised. Many books and periodicals conveyed apocalyptic anxieties and prophesied a new order and restructuring of the world on a big scale. Brodsky rightly notes that the period preceding the 1917 Bolshevik revolution was marked by an upsurge in philosophical writing, science fiction and utopian thinking, and suggests that these trends shaped many cultural projects of the 1920s. Brodsky believes that many Russians perceived the 1917 revolution as an embodiment of their utopian dreams. Furthermore, Brodsky ascribes to Platonov the ability to prefigure many postmodernist trends and to reveal a self-destructive, eschatological element within language itself.¹⁰ In Brodsky's

opinion, Platonov synthesised developments manifested in Russian literature, including the works of Nikolaj Leskov, Nikolaj Gogol' and Fedor Dostoevskij, favouring "a totally inverted, highly inflected language".¹¹ Brodsky's vision of Platonov's impersonal, folkloric and mythologised form of surrealism stems from his belief that Platonov's philosophical works of the absurd were primarily concerned with linguistic developments. "Platonov speaks of a nation," elucidates Brodsky, "which in a sense has become the victim of its own language; or, to put it more accurately, he tells a story about this very language, which turns out to be capable of generating a fictitious world, and then falls into grammatical dependence upon it."¹² Brodsky's analysis of the artificial nature of Soviet language and the orientation of Russian revolutionary-minded intellectuals towards hyper-reality can be easily compared to Mikhail Epstein's statement that modernist authors and artists associated their accomplishments with attaining the metaphysically pure reality of the "super".¹³ Epstein's observation about the desire of postmodernist authors and critics to expose in an ironising way any manifestations of super-reality as pseudo-representations of reality is fully applicable to Brodsky's interpretation of Platonov's writings. In the view of postmodernist critics, maintains Epstein, social and sexual revolutions and utopian manifestations of materialism and existentialism amount to "intellectual machines" that activate the production of pseudo-reality and pseudo social structures.¹⁴ Viewed in this light, Brodsky's observations that Platonov's *Čevengur* and 'The Foundation Pit' embody a realisation of Dostoevskij's prophecy about revolutionary changes in Russia and therefore should be read as sequels to Dostoevskij's novel *The Possessed* (*Besy*)¹⁵ might be seen as part of the ironic strategy that enables the creation of a discursive community. Brodsky appears well aware that superimposition of meaning with a critical edge, possible due to different contexts, could enable him to create an ironic detachment from both texts and co-opt his readers as fellow critics. It is unlikely that the new school curriculum in Russia would use Brodsky's essay as an interpretative tool since, as has been discussed above, construction of the new cultural canon is meant to serve the process of modern nation-building. By contrast, Brodsky focuses on the strategies of estrangement from reality embedded in Platonov's writings.

While Brodsky's comments on Platonov's works appeared in the essay he wrote one year before Perestroika, they might be seen as part of his own self-ironising: Brodsky might be playing with the reader's expectation of a prophetic utterance from him in the style of the lyric poets of the Romantic period. Brodsky's allusion to Dostoevskij might be seen as a comment testifying to the inevitable collapse of the existing social order (including the communist regime) and it might be also interpreted as a manifestation of the worldview shaped by early postmodernist developments of the post-Stalin era. As Alexei Yurchak points out, despite many Soviet citizens not

expecting the system to collapse, most accepted Perestroika developments very quickly as something logical and exciting. "Many discovered that unbeknownst to themselves," Yurchak writes, "they had always been ready for it, that they had always known that life in socialism was shaped through a curious paradox, that the system was always felt to be both stagnating and immutable, fragile and vigorous, bleak and full of promise".¹⁶ Yurchak's book on the collapse of the socialist order in the Soviet Union and its legacy deals primarily with the post-Stalin generation that reached adulthood from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s. According to his observations, the paradox of late socialism stemmed from excessive reproduction of the system's authoritarian discourse triggering profound displacement of many of the Soviet empire's subjects.¹⁷ Yurchak's analysis focuses on the disappearance of the metadiscourse on ideology in the post-Stalin period and the emergence of a hyper-normalised discursive framework that relied on the mechanical reproduction of the shared collective norm through personal imitation, rhetorical organisation of everyday life, and collective writing. These activities made the process of hyper-normalisation of that language predictable, citational and increasingly more fixed.¹⁸ Brodsky's interpretation of Platonov's works speaks to the fact that he himself witnessed the collapse of the metadiscourse on ideology in the post-Stalin period. Yet it differs from Yurchak's model inasmuch as it reveals how Brodsky himself embraced the early manifestations of the postmodern spirit in Soviet culture of the 1960s-1970s.

According to Brodsky, Platonov's works of the late 1920s to early 1930s exemplify how Platonov set language against itself in order to expose the overdeterminations of ideology and the limitations of monological discourse (thereby bringing Platonov's strategies of self-representation closer to the experiments of Russian Conceptualist artists and poets, including Dmitriy Prigov, Vitalij Komar and Aleksandr Melamid). As has been mentioned before, such a view of Platonov stands close to Epstein's conceptual underpinning for the origins of Russian postmodernism. In Epstein's view, Boris Groys's belief in the affinity of socialist realism with the utopian avant-garde project (as manifested in his book on Stalinist art)¹⁹ can be extended to the establishment of analogies between socialist realism and the postmodernist model of hyper-reality. According to Epstein, the main tenets of this artificially constructed reality are as follows: totalitarian ideology creating a new reality for millions of people; a strong anti-modernist tendency; emergence of a new type of socialist realist style based on an eclectic mix of classical, realist and romantic aesthetic models; shift from subjectivised narrative to a mode of hyper-authorship; disintegration of the binary opposition between high and mass culture; attempt to create a post-historical space; "the erasure of specifically Marxist discourse which then degenerates into a pastiche of many ideologies and philosophies, even combining materialism and idealism".²⁰ Epstein's conceptual model of postmodernist aesthetic implies that

postmodernist rejection of Utopia is in itself utopian, especially because of its orientation towards a post-historical and supra-historical mode of thinking.²¹ Epstein stops short of describing post-Soviet developments in terms of post-Soviet subjectivity associated with the collapse of official culture (characterised in the post-war period by the striking emergence of official/unofficial dialectic of which it constituted a part). In the words of Barrett Watten, many of the post-war Russian experimental and postmodern aesthetic developments permeated with an intense, utopian, and metaphysically speculative subjectivity can be called post-Soviet, despite their origin in earlier periods.²²

Viewed in this light, Brodsky's claims that Platonov attacks "the revolutionary eschatology embedded in the language" and that his every sentence drives the Russian language into semantic death (revealing "a proclivity for dead ends" and "a blind-alley mentality in the language itself")²³ prefigure Epstein's analysis of some postmodernist traits of socialist realist literature. However, according to this logic, Brodsky's statement about Platonov's ability to expose a self-destructive, eschatological element within the language itself²⁴ that had an impact on revolutionary eschatology would imply the existence of the unofficial culture's canon; in accordance with which it is Platonov, not Maksim Gor'kij, who should be considered to be the most influential figure whose writings and ideas had a significant impact on the formation of the socialist realist aesthetic.

It is noteworthy that Brodsky's interpretation of Platonov's works is not shared by other writers seen as dissidents by Soviet officials and censors. Unlike Brodsky, who reads Platonov's novels in a postmodernist vein, Tat'jana Tolstaja examines Platonov's stylistic peculiarities through a modernist prism and emphasises the importance of estrangement in his works. Her comments invoke Viktor Šklovskij's seminal article 'Art as Device' (published in 1917), especially because they include such remarks as: "at times it seems that Platonov's work was written by a creature from outer space forced to live among us"; "perhaps this is how a mythical beast would write if he were to assume human form"; "he uses words awkwardly, incorrectly, he puts them in the wrong place in the sentence"; and "he tries to convey some other kind or quality of soul with these words, another sense beyond the five familiar senses".²⁵ Clearly, Tolstaja locates Platonov's linguistic experiments in the centre of avant-garde aesthetic developments, presenting Platonov as a displaced dreamer whose texts encourage the reader to search for meaning but frustrate any attempt to find a cohesive interpretation for the contradictory and diverse perspectives found in Platonov's narratives. Although Tolstaja does not define Platonov's texts as the expressionist counter-texts of the avant-garde, she points to their open-endedness and the decentred position of the reader that emerges from the collapse of any straightforward audience identification either with the characters or with the narrator. Such an approach to Platonov's texts contradicts Malygina's above-discussed observa-

tion that many critics feel Platonov's works require their own hermeneutics. Richard Murphy's description of the Brechtian epic of the avant-garde work – which refuses to allow its audience to identify with any authoritative perspective – might illuminate Tolstaja's interpretative strategies further. "Instead of being invited to identify with the authority of the narrative's meta-discourse and so to share in that 'position from which the text is most obviously intelligible'," Murphy asserts, "the reader of the expressionist avant-garde's 'counter-texts' is *decentred*, deprived of the conventional unitary position of pseudo-mastery, and forced to confront a set of contradictory ideas and discontinuous perspectives which can no longer be synthesised by reference to a static and transcendent set of truths".²⁶

Given that Platonov was a writer of philosophical prose consciously oriented, in the words of Thomas Seifrid, "toward the root questions of existence and often assigning them a more central position in the conception of his stories and novels than more traditional questions of human psychology, history, or social existence"²⁷ we could approach Platonov's writings of the 1920s, including his novel *Čevengur*, as Platonov's contribution to the construction of the rhetorical figure of the New Man and its representation in literature. Viewed in this light, Platonov's novel lends itself to interpretation as a parable of the annihilation of the old forms of consciousness in anticipation of the emergence of new ones. As Seifrid notes, Platonov's worldview derives from many ideas developed in the works of Nikolaj Fedorov and Aleksandr Bogdanov with whom the writer shares his desire "to ground the social, economic and political orders of experience in ontology".²⁸

The ideas conveyed in the works of Bogdanov and Fedorov laid the foundation for the futuristic aspects of social engineering including the articulation of a New Man as a human being of the future and a topical ideologeme. In her illuminating article examining this image in Russian and German culture of the 1910s-1920s, Natalia Skradol proposes an analysis of the representation of the New Man as an allegory in the sense explained in Walter Benjamin's book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (written in 1925). In Skradol's view, the concept of the New Man emerged "not just as an illustration of an idea but as an evocation of something which is to come, a means to shaping a certain mode of convictions in a given society with respect to the future": therefore the socio-political relevance of these representations yield to be considered allegorical in the vein understood by Benjamin.²⁹ Benjamin's outline of the allegorical perspective on the world states:

Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealised and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the

very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death's head. And although such a thing lacks all "symbolic" freedom of expression [...] – nevertheless, this is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such but also of the biographical historicity of the individual.³⁰

According to Benjamin, what lies at the heart of allegorical vision and of the baroque in general is a model of secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world, since significance and death evolve through historical development. In other words, Benjamin emphasises the modern perspective that manifests itself in the understanding of allegorical outlook as a development of myth. Platonov's novel *Čevengur* provides many examples of such an allegorical mode of expression that brings together nature and history. Thus Platonov describes one of his characters as a loner who had been doing nothing all his life in anticipation of something significant to emerge from his life that could ascribe it with meaning:

Until the age of fifty he had just looked around him, wondering what was what and waiting for something to emerge from the general turmoil, so he could start to act once the world had cleared up and calmed down.³¹

In a similar vein, Platonov portrays Aleksandr Dvanov's father who is presented as a nameless fisherman searching for the meaning of life:

Zakhar Pavlovich had known one man, a fisherman from Lake Mutevo, who had always been asking people about death and whose curiosity had filled him with *toska*; this fisherman had loved fish not because they provided nourishment, but because they were special beings that most probably knew the secret of death.³²

Likewise, at the end of the novel Aleksandr Dvanov wants to join up with the dead body of his father and share a life-after-death experience with the image of his father that he cherished since childhood. At the novel's end Dvanov grows to perceive his life as shameful and devoid of significant meaning. Indeed, Platonov's description of Dvanov's suicide (he drowns himself in the same lake as did his father) can be best understood in terms of allegorical perspective explained thus by Benjamin:

All of the things that are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them.³³

The allegorical mode of Platonov's writing embedded in *Čevengur* illustrates well the re-emergence of allegory used in the nineteenth century in the form of commodity. As Skradol notes, "the twentieth century saw the reappearance of allegory in numerous reincarnations, one of which was the figure of the 'New Man' during the period between the two World Wars. In a way it, too, was a commodity of a kind, the promise of a better, as yet unknown, future packaged in the form of an as-yet-unknown human being."³⁴ Skradol pertinently argues that, despite the glorified images of the cult of production oriented towards future goals, in real terms the image of the New Man in early Soviet culture was used for expression, not production.

As a result, this image was meant to signify the new social order related to the bright future and progress. Given that a promise of death was incorporated into this expression, it cannot be separated from the notion of revolutionary rapture and violence. "As the early Soviet examples show," argues Skradol, "violence and violation of the basic laws of human nature do not necessarily serve a distant, high ideal; rather, their chief purpose is to be employed in the present – as tools of conviction, intimidation, or conversion to the right ideology."³⁵ To this end, it is not coincidental that Brodsky finds in Platonov's language a gesture of violation of natural laws and linguistic behaviour that he deems catastrophic. Skradol links this manifestation of rupture to the dangers of mixing two different modalities of thought within the reality of utopian politics. She elucidates: "The two modalities are politics, which, according to Talmon, 'is concerned with the careful manipulation of concrete data,' and utopianism, which 'postulates a definite goal or pre-ordained finale to history' [...]. The former is firmly set in the present while the latter is oriented towards the future. The disturbed balance between the temporal dimensions in the presentation and ordering of reality has devastating consequences for the organisation of society, and the transition from the allegorical to the symbolic to the literal is one of the manifestations of this disturbance."³⁶

Skradol's explanation enables us to understand why Angela Livingstone sees Platonov's *Čevengur* as the novel that embodies the terrifying consequences of utopianism: it disturbs the balance between the temporal dimensions related to the organisation of society in accordance with utopian desire. She writes that in *Čevengur* "Platonov looks at another kind of attempt at the annihilation of 'everything' and preparation for a new universe". Livingstone links a search, undertaken by eleven Bolsheviks in charge of a small provincial steppe town for emerging signs of their version of Communism, to the theme of the death of time. According to Livingstone, the attempt to end time is narrated in the last third of the novel. Livingstone thus explains these structural peculiarities of *Čevengur*:

The author did not divide the book into parts, nor even distinctly into chapters, but the twenty-seven sections suggested by gaps in the manuscript text could be grouped as follows: a first part, set in the early twentieth century, which concerns the growing up of the main hero, Aleksandr Dvanov, and describes a number of people who suffer and seek a better life; a second part, set in the years of revolution and civil war, which narrates the wanderings of Dvanov and his quixotic friend Kopenkin over the steppelands in search of that better life, now named “Communism”; and a third part about the introduction of Communism, and with it the ending of time, in a strangely isolated town, Chevengur.³⁷

Livingstone’s analysis of the use of temporal categories in the novel demonstrates convincingly that Platonov’s *Čevengur* embodies a warning about the true danger of utopian politics that leads to the disturbance of balance between literal and metaphoric modes of thinking and the subsequent substitution of reality with imagined social order.

In light of the above observations on the representation of the tragic consequences of utopian politics in Platonov’s *Čevengur*, it is not surprising that his novel attracted the attention of Lev Dodin (born in 1944), a prominent post-Soviet theatre director based in St Petersburg (where the October 1917 revolution took place). Dodin became director of the Malyj Drama Theatre in 1983. According to Peter Lichtenfels, Dodin’s theatre might be considered a leading new theatre of the post-Soviet period.³⁸ Dodin belongs to the same generation as Brodsky. Like Brodsky, Dodin is considered to be an early representative of the post-Soviet mode of artistic expression before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Dodin’s 1985 production of *Brothers and Sisters* (*Brat’ja i sestry*) was widely praised for its open discussion of Soviet history and nowadays it is perceived as the first post-Soviet theatrical production in anticipation of Gorbačev’s reforms. Commenting on Dodin’s interest in philosophical aspects of history and identity, Lichtenfels writes:

While Dodin eschews the political, he is certainly politically engaged, becoming a strong critic of the Soviet Union’s involvement in Afghanistan and, later, Russian involvement in Chechnya. He is also concerned that Russians never openly examine their history and therefore are in danger of repeating its mistakes.³⁹

More importantly, in a manner similar to Brodsky, Dodin values artistic independence and the subversive qualities of creative production. In his interview with Lichtenfels, Dodin confesses: “I think, theatre gains, as any artist gains, only when the most important aspects of its art are dissident – when theatre is breaking rules as opposed to following rules.”⁴⁰ Given

Dodin's conviction that the theatre's link with history should be linear and direct, it is not surprising that he considers literary manifestations of memory and responses to historical events (including Tolstoj's descriptions of Napoleon and Alexander I) more valuable than the accounts produced by political figures since they are more "pertinent to how we see history".⁴¹ By the same token, Dodin values more the description of the origin of life found in the Bible rather than in Darwin's evolutionary theories. Dodin's interest in biblical subtexts and mythopoetic narratives that present history through the prism of a particular character in allegorical terms as a story of suffering is particularly evident in this statement: "When we tell the story of a particular character, we try to show how he's been a victim of history."⁴² It is not coincidental therefore that Brodsky's image of Platonov as an eccentric metaphysician, materialist thinker and an heir of Dostoevskij appears to have influenced Dodin whose 1999 adaptation of Platonov's *Čevengur* was received enthusiastically by Russian critics. Many critics label it a parable about Russian communism that warns about the dangers of utopian thinking. Given that Dodin believes in art's mission to connect the past and the present, it is not coincidental that the actors who played the representatives of the Čevengur community resemble post-Soviet tramps rather than the eccentric Bolsheviks described in Platonov's novel. It is also important that Dodin replaced the image of the lake found in *Čevengur* with the image of the river. The latter invokes both the image that represents the flow of Time portrayed in Gavril Deržavin's ode 'On the Death of Prince Meščerskij' (1779; 'Na smert' knjazja Meščerskogo') and Isaak Babel's graphic description of how the river Zbruč contained many dead bodies of soldiers and horses from the violent Civil War between the Whites and the Reds incorporated into his book *Red Cavalry* (Konarmija, 1924).

Roman Dolžanskij characterises Dodin's adaptation as a mythopoetic production. Dolžanskij thinks that Dodin's rendering of Platonov's novel, in which a group of dreamers and vagabonds is portrayed as one collective body, becomes more grotesque and becomes a community infected by the virus of eschatological thinking. It can be added to Dolžanskij's observation that the infected collective body turned by Dodin into a theatrical spectacle is comparable to Stalin's society afflicted by a cancer – found in Aleksandr Solženicyn's novel *Cancer Ward* (*Rakovyj korpus*, 1963-1966). By the same token it can be argued that both Dodin and Solženicyn present themselves as heirs of Anton Čechov who produces a medical diagnosis for social ills. It is especially illuminating that one of the highlights of Dodin's production features a gypsy woman with the dead body of a child whom she tries to resuscitate in vain. Indeed, in allegorical manner, Dodin's play presents an atmosphere of decay. "The whole production," Dolžanskij writes, "gives an impression of a performed parable, or archaic mystery that takes place in an ahistorical temporal dimension."⁴³ As Dolžanskij points out, despite the play

containing twelve characters (he fails to mention that the latter alludes to Blok's poem 'The Twelve' ['Dvenadcat'], 1918), the main focus of Dodin's production is on the collective body that erases the notion of individuality. To this end, it would be possible to develop Dolžanskij's explanation further and suggest that Dodin's theatrical rendering of Platonov's characters stands closer to the collective body featured in Michail Bachtin's works on carnivalesque laughter, especially because of the play's excessive use of the grotesque and humour.

Given that notion of the carnivalesque, based on the unfinalised nature of laughter, and akin to his notion of polyphony, it appears that Dodin's strategy to carnivalise Platonov's novel might be linked to his desire to ascribe the theatrical production with the therapeutic qualities that could enable the audience to experience the tragedy in a defamiliarised manner. In other words, in Bakhtinian style, Dodin believes in the liberating nature of laughter and parody. Bachtin suggests that "the carnival sense of the world" knows no period and "is hostile to any sense of *conclusive conclusion*: all endings are merely new beginnings" because "carnival images are reborn again and again".⁴⁴

By immersing his audience into the palimpsest-like fictional world and intertextual place, Dodin expects the spectator to compare his production both to Platonov's text and to canonical twentieth-century literary works, including Gor'kij's play *The Lower Depths* (*Na dne*, 1901) and Blok's long poem 'The Twelve'. Both works were incorporated into the socialist realist canon. Thus, at the play's beginning, Dodin's characters discuss the essential qualities of humanity; one of the characters offers a quote from Gor'kij's play: "Human being! It sounds lofty" ("Человек – это звучит гордо"). At the end of the production, one of the characters identifies his utopian dream with the girl Kat'ka, invoking thereby Blok's 'The Twelve' that features twelve soldiers and a prostitute named Kat'ka. The intertextual link between Dodin's adaptation of Platonov's novel and Blok's 'The Twelve' is also reinforced through excessive usage of religious imagery, including the use of the aquarium fish that is killed (its head is removed right at the start of the production) and the signs of crosses and cross-like objects.

The appearance on stage of a mother with a dead child and Sonja (presented as a young woman longing for Aleksandr Dvanov and at the same time resenting any sexual love) highlights the anti-procreative stance as an important ingredient of the avant-garde outlook and aesthetic sensibility shaped by a matter-spirit dualism. It would not be exaggerating to say that Dodin reads Platonov through the lens of Nikolaj Berdjaev's vision of a creative androgynous sex as conveyed in his 1914 essay 'The Meaning of the Creative Act'. As Irina Gutkin aptly notes, Berdjaev's views embody the utopian futurological aspiration of the Silver Age period: they laid the foundation for the theory of human sexuality expounded by socialist realist

writers.⁴⁵ In Blokian manner, Dodin presents Sonja as an unattainable virginal bride of Soviet revolutionaries. Dodin's grotesque representation of the androgynous aspects of human nature embedded in Platonov's novel invokes Berdjaev's prediction of the advancement of technological utopia and the crisis of motherhood. Berdjaev describes his new vision of love as follows:

For the coming world-epoch and the new world-life, womanliness will be confirmed in the aspect of virginity rather than motherhood. The whole world crisis is culminating in the crisis of motherhood, and by this very fact the crisis of maternal itself. We witness the beginning of a futuristic, technical end of the religion of race, the religion of the material [...]. There will be left of the material only a transfigured sensibility and an eternal form of illuminated corporeality, freed of all the weight and of the organic necessity of race.⁴⁶

In satirical vein, Dodin's play embodies Aleksandra Kollontaj's vision of a comradesly solidarity, compatible with the proletarian ideology of the 1920s, through excessive use of embraces and kisses performed on stage and also through acts of collective creativity, including the attempt of the citizens of Čevengur to cure Aleksandr Dvanov and revive the dead child brought to him by a mournful mother. As Kollontaj explains:

The striving to express love not only in kisses and embraces, but in togetherness of action, in unity of will, in joint creation, will grow. The task of proletarian ideology is not to banish Eros from the social community, but only to rearm its quiver with the arrows of a new structure, to nurture the feeling of love between the sexes in the spirit of the greatest force, comradesly solidarity.⁴⁷

Undoubtedly, the image of Rosa Luxemburg appearing in Dodin's play embodies Kollontaj's principles more effectively than Platonov's text due to the use of intertextual references and visual montage.

In Dodin's theatrical adaptation of the novel, Kopenkin often shows the photograph of Rosa Luxemburg published in one of the issues of the newspaper *The Truth (Pravda)*: he carries it with him all the time. Arguably, Rosa Luxemburg becomes a character of the play in her own right. Given the absence of references to Lenin in Dodin's play, the image of Rosa Luxemburg becomes the centre of attention as an allegorical embodiment of the revolution and, to some extent, as a goddess who expects her followers to sacrifice their loves for the sake of her own immortality. Towards the end of the play, Luxemburg's photograph is separated from the newspaper feature about her, in order that the rest of the newspaper could be used for making cigarettes. This is one of many examples of how Dodin compresses many events described in *Čevengur* into a series of scenes. The interchangeability

of objects and metamorphoses occurring on stage illustrates well the instability of the identities of the utopian revolutionaries in the making, whose linguistic behaviour might be understood in Losevian terms pertinent to his version of *imjaslavie* that entwines the name of God with the energy of God. Losev's conceptualisation of linguistic behaviour suggests that language emerges from divine essence. According to the logic implied in Losev's thought, as Seifrid explains, "God must present some symbolic manifestation, some revelation of himself to the world" and "if we search among all the phenomena that might serve as this manifestation, the most privileged turns out to be language."⁴⁸ Arguably, the name of Rosa Luxemburg, invoked throughout the production in the style of a sacred ritual, points to the apophatic qualities of the language used by Platonov's characters. In other words, Dodin rightly underscores Platonov's profound interest in the absolutised form of language adopted by many revolutionaries in the 1920s from the works of Aleksandr Potebnja and his disciples, including Losev, whose conception of language stems from a doctrine of the divine Person and His incarnation. Seifrid elucidates:

To inquire into the nature of language is to discover not just Husserlian "essence" but revelation. And when we speak or write – and Losev's sense of such activities could only have been heightened by the hostile conditions of the Soviet era – we reify a part of the divine nature.⁴⁹

In other words, Dodin both visualises the contradictions embedded in the language of Platonov's characters and exposes the religiosity and ritual-like style of behaviour of the adherents of the revolutionary truths invoked by Platonov's *Čevengur*.

Given the martyr-like presentation of Luxemburg during the whole performance, it seems that Dodin expects his audience to know that she was arrested for participating in an anti-war demonstration on 1 May 1916 and imprisoned, where she subsequently wrote her book *The Russian Revolution*.⁵⁰ In this book Luxemburg criticised vehemently Lenin's use of terror and violence against the government in Russia and its supporters. The cult-like worship of Rosa Luxemburg as a critic of Lenin incorporated into Dodin's production might be interpreted as a post-Soviet gesture imbued with autobiographical overtones. Thus in one of his interviews (*Izvestija*, 17.03.2006) Dodin talks about his hatred for the totalitarian mode of thinking and his own desire to kill within himself his Soviet self. Dodin's production of Platonov's novel presents the communist utopia as an infectious disease that makes people blind to reality and deprives them of their human identity. It exposes the use of language for Soviet propaganda and, in a satirical vein, demonstrates the emptiness of its rhetorical gestures. As Dolžanskij compellingly argues, the repetitive use of the word "communism" through the

entire performance gives an impression that it acts as an impersonal force possessing the citizens of Čevengur and alienating them from the rest of the world to the point of absurdity. Other official Soviet clichés become carnivalised in the play, such as the expression of the current moment (“текущий момент”), which paronomasia-like becomes associated with water current and flow of life (“текущий момент”; “теучка”) that exist separately from the people who use this expression.

The process of carnivalisation aimed at the exposure of the empty language used for seventy years by the Soviet authorities is presented in Dodin's play as a spectacle, akin to the use of official language (sots-speak) in Václav Havel's plays *Memorandum* (1965) and *The Garden Party* (1963). Paul Trensky comments on the plays of the absurd produced by Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter and Havel, pointing out that in a theatre featuring spiritless characters, words become the centre of attention. According to Trensky, language in such plays ceases to serve character development to the effect that characters turn into the vehicle of language. Trensky writes that “words form people by filling their inner void until human speech stops functioning as a means of communication and becomes a form of social behaviour” and, as a result of this behaviour, “language no longer serves to express ideas”: it becomes meaningless.⁵¹

Trensky's observation is fully applicable to Dodin's play. One example of the carnivalisation of Soviet language and ritualised behaviour relates to the representation of violence in the play: it appears that the representatives of the Čevengur community depicted in Dodin's play have a notion of the union of words and deeds. In order to establish their town as being truly communist, they feel that they need to kill enemies of the Revolution. Several naked bodies of enemies are brought to the stage in see-through plastic bags and the citizens of Čevengur strangle them to ensure they are fully dead. In other words, this scene of violence is meant to illustrate the subjective position of any communist who creates an arbitrary image of his/her class enemy and who justifies the logic of his/her own action by the use of abstract language charged with political meaning.

Another important contribution of Dodin's play to the post-Soviet deconstruction of the revolutionary language examined in Platonov's *Čevengur* is related to the representation of temporal categories in terms of spatial ones. To this end, Dodin challenges the notion of revolution advocated by Marx and Lenin as a part of historical dialectical development and describes it in terms of stasis and stagnation. Such a subversive interpretation of the revolutionary process exposes the utopian idealism in the Stalinist logic laced with eschatological overtones that derive a Platonic vision of social developments and the messianic perspective of the Last Judgement. According to Slavoj Žižek, there are numerous similarities between charismatic leaders and totalitarian leaders based on the performative mechanism

that presupposes the existence of the symbolic ritual performed by the subjects of this or that king or leader. Žižek explains:

The formula of the totalitarian misrecognition of the performative dimension would then be as follows: the Party thinks that it is the Party because it represents the People's real interests, because it is rooted in the People, expressing their will; but in reality the People are the People because – or more precisely, in so far – they are embodied in the Party.⁵²

Undoubtedly, Dodin's theatrical rendering of Platonov's novel *Čevengur* is aimed at the post-Soviet audience. It is clear from the reviews of Dodin's production that the implied post-Soviet spectator of Dodin's adaptation of Platonov's novel is overwhelmed by the sense of disorientation and melancholy. The spectator is being engaged in the process of mourning the loss of an ability to see utopian desire and the construction of modern collective self in a positive light. To this end, the production appears to expose the paradox described in Žižek's book: it asserts that if we were to create a Lacanian model of democracy, it should amount to a sociopolitical order in which ordinary people exist not as a collective body but as a unity that enables them to preserve their unique representative self.⁵³ By the same token, Dodin's play translates Platonov's novel into the language of post-modern and post-Soviet reality that allows him to critique the notion of impersonalised mode of formal and highly rationalised democracy. This rationalised type of social order presents all the participants as atomised individuals and abstract citizens.

As the present analysis of different approaches to Platonov's *Čevengur* has demonstrated, the recent proposal for its inclusion in the list of 100 recommended books suitable for all Russian school-leavers today (they are expected to read all the books most attentively) might be seen as problematic. The novel does not lend itself very easily to be read as a prescriptive text to cure utopian thinking, due to its ambiguity and open-endedness. In the television programme *Apokrif* shown by the prestigious channel *Culture* (*Kul'tura*) on 18 January 2011, titled 'Doubting Platonov' ('Usomnivšijsja Platonov'), several critics and writers – including Viktor Erofeev, Pavel Basinskij, Aleksej Varlamov and Natal'ja Kornienko – highlighted many difficulties of Platonov's novels, especially of his novel *Čevengur*. While Varlamov thinks Platonov's eclectic style and philosophical outlook were influenced by Blok, Vasilij Rozanov and Nikolaj Fedorov, Basinskij asserts that it would be too difficult for the contemporary reader to understand Platonov's ideas and peculiarities of his language without a solid knowledge of the proletarian culture of the 1920s.⁵⁴ Perhaps, Dodin's theatrical version of *Čevengur* that was recorded for Russian television in 2009 and was shown by

the channel *Kul'tura* will remain the most effective tool of introducing Platonov's novel and making it more accessible to the contemporary reader who would understand the visual language of the play better than its verbal one. The most important goal of the play is to draw the audience's attention to the mechanisms of memory and forgetting. In this respect, the audience is encouraged to empathise with the dreamers and vagabonds depicted in Platonov's *Čevengur* because their religious-like commitment to ideals and their boundless creative potential appear misplaced in today's Russia that continues to grapple with its communist past and its legacy.

NOTES

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